

# JCT Kitchen

1198 Howell Mill Road, Atlanta, 404-355-2252

By [MERIDITH FORD](#)

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 03/08/2007

IN 1961's "The Artist's and Writer's Cookbook," William Styron wrote that Southern fried chicken was an "indigenous American culinary triumph" so misinterpreted by cooks that he felt the need for a "central governing body, as the French have with Cognac and Roquefort, which might make mandatory certain controls over what could be, and should be, one of the greatest glories of our native cuisine."

Thanks be that we don't have such controls. Thanks be that our glorious chicken, like our cooks, varies with each skillet in which it is fried. A lot of talk and press has been given to various chicken frying artists around the city, with kudos passed out like [candy canes](#) at Christmas to Scott Peacock of Watershed (where the chicken is moist and tender, not too crispy and, like most of Peacock's creations, a little salty), to the soul food kitchen Deacon Burton's (which has the kind of crisp-skinned, under-breaded, slightly greasy feel of the chicken of my childhood), to Gladys' (where the preternaturally crispy, over-battered chicken is a backdrop to the waffles).

And now there is Ford Fry, a native Houstonian who made his way to Atlanta via the New England Culinary Institute, the Ritz-Carlton in Aspen, and Eatzi's. Somewhere along the way, he learned to fry chicken. His is a thin battered, slightly crispy, super-moist chicken, perfectly seasoned and just begging for comparison to Peacock's, only frankly Fry's is better. He serves it with a cheesy, bubbly mess of [macaroni and cheese](#) and tender green beans.

Everything about Fry's new Southern restaurant, JCT Kitchen (which he originally wanted to be an authentic taqueria), works. He has taken the fundamentals of great French bistro cooking and done with it what all gifted Southern cooks do: Cook great food. Fundamentals are, after all, fundamentals — no matter which side of the Atlantic you are on.

The restaurant, located at Westside Urban Market in the spot where first Commune, then Sampan crashed and burned (including the lovely Susie Wong's upstairs), was created by Smith Hanes Design. The interior has been completely transformed: Open to light, the walls are bathed in muted tones of khaki; a farm table in the center of the room is home to a server's station stacked with flatware wrapped in blue-and-white dish towels used as napkins and big glass pitchers of water.

The menu boasts of farmstead cooking, and for the most part, Fry lives up to the interpretation. Rarities such as fishy tasting wood-grilled salmon over whipped potatoes and sunchoke pasta in a thin broth fail. So does overly dry chocolate cake covered in a suspiciously shiny fudge icing. A shrimp-and-crab concoction, served in a cocktail glass, tastes too much like Bloody Mary mix.

The rest of Fry's menu succeeds on so many levels. And yes, it's easy to liken JCT Kitchen to Watershed: Both restaurants have easygoing, laid-back Southern style; both chefs like to cook within the realm of classic Southern cuisine, but with a broad brush stroke of personal interpretation; both offer extremely pleasant dining experiences.

But I would hate for Fry to be pigeon-holed into perpetual comparison. He strikes out on his own in many wonderful ways — chicken and dumplings is a loose interpretation of what you grew up on, a red wine braised chicken rich with intense flavor in a demi glace dotted with mushrooms and pillowy potato gnocchi (not exactly grandma's). Or sturdy shrimp and grits made with Anson Mills coarse ground yellow grits, sweet and chocked with bits of corn that seem part creamed corn, part subliminal intoxication.

Crusty hearth bread, not corn bread, is brought to the table, and it's what's needed for sopping the buttery chicken broth from a dish of hand-cut egg noodles with mushrooms and spinach. Fry serves a small cheese plate with cheddars and goat cheese from Georgia's Sweetgrass Dairy. His trout is fresh, simply flavored with a crisped silvery skin. At lunch, his "grown up" grilled cheese is a salacious romp through buttered brioche, three cheeses, sliced tomatoes and basil.

Then there's dessert. Kathryn King of Aria helped design simple offerings perfect for rounding out the rest of Fry's uncomplicated menu, highlighted by a gingerbread pudding that is part light spice cake, part gooey pudding and smeared with a contrast of tart lemon curd.

The comfortable space upstairs offers a sweeping view of Atlanta's ever-changing skyline, as well as a darned good beer list (though bourbon and gin are slim pickings).

Just behind, trains edge along the track that runs behind the restaurant, squeaking and moaning with tired wheels. The sound blends in nicely with strains of Jack Johnson on the restaurant's soundtrack. Unlike Fry and JCT Kitchen, the trains seem destined for nowhere. Like me, they want to stay at JCT and sit a while.

---

**Overall rating:** ★★★★★

**Food:** Southern farmstead cooking

**Service:** A hodgepodge of knowledge, from grasshopper to Eagle Scout, so it depends on your server as to how helpful he or she may be.

**Address, telephone:** 1198 Howell Mill Road, 404-355-2252

**Price range:** \$\$\$

**Credit cards:** Visa, MasterCard, American Express

**Hours of operation:** Open for lunch Monday through Saturday from 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., dinner Monday through Thursday from 5 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday from 5 to 11 p.m.; JCT Bar is open Tuesday through Thursday from 5 p.m. until midnight and Friday and Saturday from 5 p.m. until 2 a.m.

**Best dishes:** Shrimp and grits, fried chicken with green beans and macaroni and cheese, chicken and dumplings, "grown up" grilled cheese, Carolina trout

**Vegetarian selections:** Mac-n-cheese, green beans, whipped potatoes, chopped salad

**Children:** Perfect for kids at lunch or early evening

**Parking:** Complimentary valet

**Reservations:** Accepted

**Wheelchair access:** Yes

**Smoking:** JCT Bar only, and only outside

**Noise level:** Medium to high

**Patio:** Yes, part of the JCT Bar upstairs

**Takeout:** Yes

**Web site:** [www.jctkitchen.com](http://www.jctkitchen.com)

#### KEY TO RATINGS

★★★★★ **Outstanding:** Sets the standard for fine dining in the region.

★★★★☆ **Excellent:** One of the best in the Atlanta area.

★★★☆☆ **Very good:** Merits a drive if you're looking for this kind of dining.

★★☆☆☆ **Good:** A worthy addition to its neighborhood, but food may be hit or miss.

★☆☆☆☆ **Fair:** The food is more miss than hit.

Restaurants that do not meet these criteria may be rated **Poor**.

**Pricing code:** \$\$\$\$\$ means more than \$75; \$\$\$\$ means \$75 and less; \$\$\$ means \$50 and less; \$\$ means \$25 and less; \$ means \$15 and less. (The price code represents a meal for one that includes appetizer, entree and dessert without including tax, tip and cocktails.)

FIRST LOOK

## Light into JCT's farmhouse chic, Southern spirit

By JOHN KESSLER

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Published on: 03/02/2007

The third time may be the charm for one of the most promising and most treacherous restaurant spaces in the city.

JCT Kitchen & Bar opened this year in the rear of the Westside retail development that houses three of Midtown's most popular restaurants — Bacchanalia, Figo Pasta and Taqueria del Sol. Named for the passing freight train that occasionally rattles its walls, JCT serves what chef Ford Fry calls "Southern farmstead cooking." Think buttermilk-brined fried chicken, fried [apple pie](#), chopped salad and a citified version of chicken and dumplings that seems to be struggling — deliciously — with issues of latent coq au vin-ism.

The looming, patio-level restaurant space and upstairs bar has long lured would-be restaurateurs with hip concepts. Initially they opened as Commune, a moody New York offshoot with sinister recessed lights that glowed red. It felt like a nightclub, minus the people.

Next came Sampan and Suzy Wong's cocktail lounge — an upscale Chinese spot with a Shanghai-bordello-in-the-'40s decor.

The owners of JCT hired designer Smith Hanes to open up the space with floor-to-ceiling windows and light, natural colors. The furnishings, says Hanes, are supposed to "feel as comfortable as a living room."

Let the sun shine in.

**JCT Kitchen & Bar.** 1198 Howell Mill Road, 404-355-2252